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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on using writing activities in adult basic education/General Educational Development level classes to increase students' self-confidence, enjoyment of writing, and opportunities for group instruction. Suggestions are made for early writing experiences as well as later activities. The writing activities most enjoyed by other groups of students are also recommended. Recommendations for revision and correction of students' later work are also made. (YLB)

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TECHNíQUES

Writing Activities Enliven ABE/GED Class

by Bette Hinkle, ABE Teacher with Fairfax County (Virginia) Public Schools

This Technique was edited by Edward V. Jones and Jean H. Lowe, who are editors of the Virginia ABE Newsletter. They will also edit four Techniques in Volume 9.

Writing activities that are fun and interesting can be used in an ABE/GED level class as an effective way to increase students' self-confidence and to enable them to find the writing process more comfortable and enjoyable. Another purpose can be to give class members additional opportunities to form friendly relationships and to work together as a group. When asked about previous writing experiences, many students will express at least some dislike and fear of writing. These anxieties can be somewhat relieved when the first class writing activities prove to be brief and more like fun than hard work.

At first, students may be reluctant to read their own work aloud and may feel more relaxed if the teacher reads all the papers to the class. As each work is read, if the teacher comments on the parts he or she likes, often other class members will express their approval or appreciation. The teacher's modeling of appropriate responses can help to create a climate which will enable even very shy students to gain the confidence necessary to share their writing with the class. Sometimes students will say that their work sounds different from what they were trying to say. This can lead to some good discussions of how to say things better, more clearly, or more interestingly.

As a result of positive experiences with writing activities, students can gain the self-confidence to approach new activities with more interest than dread. Differences in ability levels should not prove to be a problem as the focus is on communication of thoughts and feelings rather than on the mechanics of writing. Even beginning literacy level students can enjoy writing activities as something in which they can participate as members of the class. At first they might dictate to the teacher, a tutor, or another class member. Later they will prefer to do their own writing, with frequent requests for help with spelling. Once a climate of respectful listening and friendly sharing has been established, students of all levels will tactfully support one another's efforts.

Getting Started

Many good beginning writing exercises can be found in the New Readers Press publications, USING LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE WITH ADULTS and I WISH I WOULD WRITE! One activity, "Five Things About Myself—One of Them is a Lie," is a good ice-breaker, as the students' interest in guessing which statement is false overcomes their fears of having their own sentences read aloud. Another good beginning exercise is "Sentence Completions," for example, "I always. . . ," "I remember. . . ," "I wish. . . ," "I hate. . . ," "I believe. . . ," "I wonder. . . ." This activity provides just enough structure to enable students to get started and leads to some interesting insights into individual personalities. Slightly less structured and a good, informal group activity is "Questions and Answers," in which each person writes a question to a good neighbor, who writes an answer and, in turn, writes a question for the next person. "Acrostics" is another interesting brief activity. Students use the letters in their first name to begin sentences telling

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something about themselves. When the sentences are read aloud, class members enjoy discussing what they tell about the readers.

Most Enjoyed Writing Activities

One of the exercises students most enjoy uses pictures from the New Readers Press booklets, WORKING, PLAYING, LOVING, and LAUGHING. Each student is asked to choose a picture and describe what he or she thinks is happening, imagining what has preceded that scene and what might occur afterward. Class members have fun with this exercise and can come up with some imaginative and amusing ideas. Another extremely popular exercise is writing replies to questions asked in "Ann Landers" or "Dear Abby" columns. This activity is more enjoyable after a class has been meeting several months, as each person's reply tends to be consistent with what is known about his or her personality. After the students have all read their replies aloud, the teacher may read the columnist's. Students usually prefer their own! Students often comment that they enjoy this activity and hope to do it again.

Ideals for poetry writing can be found in Kenneth Koch's book *I NEVER TOLD ANYBODY* (Teaching Poetry Writing in a Nursing Home). In one brief activity, each student thinks of a favorite color and writes a few lines on feelings and experiences this color brings to mind. This exercise can produce some vivid images and even some playing with words. (One student wrote, "The blue light turns me on.") From these kinds of sentences a "class poem" might be constructed, taking the most picturesque or interesting line from each student's paper. Students are often surprised and intrigued by these ideas, and will usually begin to think and talk about some of the characteristics of poetry. After writing a variety of poems, students may also enjoy compiling their own and others' poems into booklets. Another benefit of poetry writing is that the strong, vivid words are often easy for literacy level students to remember and read. They may be able to read a class poem or booklet almost independently, and will be delighted to recognize their own lines included with the others.

Revising and Correcting

Remembering that the purpose of these writing activities is to increase students' self-confidence, enjoyment of writing, and opportunities for group interaction, it is better to postpone any attempts at revision or correction. Students can be told that their work will not be corrected, and that the aim at first is simply to get their thoughts down on paper and to share their ideas with one another. If some students are very concerned about correct spelling, the teacher and nearby students can offer to help when questions arise. Much later, when students have become comfortable with the writing process, revision may be encouraged by using individual writing conferences. In these conferences, the teacher can make comments and ask questions that will encourage writers to continue doing what they have done well, and to begin considering ways to clarify or expand what they have written. Later still, perhaps when the students themselves would like a finished product, correction of mechanical errors can be introduced. Even before this, however, teachers may find that the increased opportunities for practicing writing, together with positive responses to successful efforts, have resulted in a gradual increase in both the fluency and the effectiveness of students' writing.